



ACE COMBAT 3

electrosphere

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INTERVIEW

Why Electrosphere? A Face-to-Face on A C 3

It all began at the training camp...

----- "Ace Combat 3" is a dramatic game done in the style of a sci-fi anime, but could you start by telling us about the major changes made from previous installments?

Iwasaki It's a series, so if we followed the same path as before, there would be no major changes, and that would not be interesting for us as creators. We had many ideas, like for example, a 3D shooter in the style of "Dragon Spirit," or a 3D shooter with a robot that fights mobile suits. The focus was on story from the beginning, so a futuristic worldview was just the right setting for a somewhat offbeat approach that would not betray the expectations of those who support the series. We also thought that if we were to create a sci-fi worldview, we could create a good mix of current digital animation and gaming. We thought it would be possible to come up with an approach different from full CG (computer graphics). The main goal, however, was to broaden the scope of the game so that more people would be able to enjoy the fun of flight shooters.

----- Did you have any concerns about the completely different style?

Iwasaki There were many little details in it that convinced me that this could work. The reason we had made "Ace Combat 2" was because there were no realistic flight shooting games with enough detail, atmosphere, and a worldview to really get into. I was worried that if we tried to do the same thing with 3, would I really be able to create something truly new and exciting? But on the other hand, I thought that by doing something different, it would allow all kinds of ideas to be born. Since the foundation is being done by the same staff of the series, my hope is that people will be satisfied playing this one.

----- So, when discussing expanding its worldview, what made you pick Satō for the job?

Iwasaki When it came to creating the story, I wanted to work with outside people who were working in setting and scriptwriting professionally. As we discussed various things, we came to the conclusion that Satō would be a pretty good fit (laughs). I met with him right away, and I thought he would be easy to work with because he had a similar vibe to what we had in mind, and he's from the same generation as us. The initial enthusiasm and impression he gave me were a big factor.

Satō There are confidentiality requirements, so when I was invited to join the project, I didn't know what kind of game it would, so I decided to just go for it. They then showed me all the prototypes of the worldview, and that's when I realized it was "Ace Combat 3." I don't think there has ever been a shooter with a story as a pillar. I had the impression that the story was just a flavor for the time being. That was the case for this series, too, where up until now, you were only told to complete the mission. Namco wanted to present this shooter in a different way. I had always been on the outside looking in, so I thought it would be interesting if I could get more involved as a creator. I also have a soft spot for Namco. It's a generational thing. When I read the novel "Xevious," I thought, "Wow, that's what a Bacura is!" or "Those are the Nazca Lines...". There is a sense of gratitude in my mind toward those things. I had this idea in my mind that I would write this work like the "XEVIOUS" novels, something I had always wanted to do. I think this was a big part of it for me.

Iwasaki You held a training camp first, didn't you?

Satō That was my idea. I suggested that we and Namco staff hold a training camp and let off steam together (laughs). I thought it would be interesting if we could work on putting it all together afterwards, because we didn't know much about each other before the first camp. We were very far apart in our fields. As we talked about various things, we found out that although we were from different fields, we were very close in the way we looked at things. We laughed at the same gags and talked about things that had nothing to do with the game, such as how pretty a girl was.

Iwasaki On the way to the training camp, I heard that we were going to Umihotaru (lit. sea firefly) at Aqua-Line in Chiba, so we went there. We were all so impressed by the scenery (laughs). We were able to share our thoughts about everyday things like how nice it is, and how people make things like this.

Satō Game development is a long process. If you don't have that kind of time together, you end up having problems with each other. We end up having to use more words when trying to reconcile things. When explaining a key word, for example, there is a big difference between explaining "Actually, character so-and-so is..." and just saying, "This is a little too "so-and-so" for me. I think we should change it." So there you have it. Even for a single character, you have to ask yourself, "What kind of backbone does this person have? That's why I ask them to show me their ideas for a character, and while looking at the pictures, we keep talking about what kind of person he was when he was little. How did he end up flying? What kind of school did he go to? I would ask them questions like, "Why did he get on a plane? Then, I would say, "But if this is all there is to the character, there's not much motivation, is there?" If you create a personality first, you can flesh out the story by saying, "If I put this personality into this story, this person will say this line" and so on.

Iwasaki It was interesting. When we worked on projects internally, we didn't have the opportunity to work on projects outside the office.

Satō You can't put together a project unless you have endless meetings. I went first from the TV industry to the music industry and then to the videogame industry. The TV and music industries have a lot of that kind of rhythm. When planning TV projects, we would have meetings where no one leaves. We'd sleep on tatami mats and talk. I wanted to replicate that pattern with games.

Iwasaki I'm a Namco guy through and through (laughs). I used to stay overnight in the company's conference room, but this was my first time working lying down on a tatami mat. I thought it was pretty nice (laughs). Everybody loved it.

When the personality expands, the story expands naturally

-----This time, the story itself is connected to the gameplay system, so it's hard to say which came first. It must have been quite a task, right?

Satō There was an outline. A mechanic that would be fun as a game. Orders to do this kind of mechanic here, and to do this kind of event here, so we had a lot of meetings to see if they were served the story. In the very first meeting, we kept talking about "Why this world?". and "Why would there be a war in this world?" and "Wouldn't it be better if we didn't have to fight a war in this setting?". But I wasn't going to turn the base upside down. When someone asked me "What should we do?" my role would be to say "Here's what I think you should do."

Iwasaki As I explained the content and gameplay system to Satō, we went over the different themes, like Keith or Cynthia for example, to see if they'd work well together.

Satō Yes, that's right. Every single character involved the question, "What kind of backbone does this person have?" So I'd ask them to show me what kind of character they wanted to create, and while looking at the pictures, we would talk about what kind of person they were when they were little. We would ask questions like why they became a pilot, what kind of school they went to, as if we were actually interviewing them. Then I said that if that's all there is to the character, then it doesn't provide much motivation. If we create the personality first, we can then put them in the story, and they'll say these kinds of lines, thereby fleshing out the story along the way.

----- You've worked on TV shows and novels, but you've never worked on a story with multiple endings. What was it like to create a scenario where the story changes based on the player's actions?

Satō I was really worried about that. The breakthrough came when we decided on the last big story idea.

Iwasaki In the end, it all comes down to what makes the story branch out, and that is the meaning of this story. It's the act of the player making a decision that makes the story come alive. It was interesting to see how it evolved from there, wasn't it?

Satō It's a branching story, but it's still one singular story. It's just one pattern in a very grand story. I don't know how to put it. For me, it's one story, even if it's branched out.

Iwasaki I think the fact that the player's decisions lead him down different paths is itself depicted as science fiction.

Satō Rather than trying to create a branching story, I just created one big world with many possibilities. At the very end of the project, I was still trying to figure out how I was supposed to end it, when someone said, "Hey, doesn't it look like this?" That's when I decided on the ending. Once I had decided on one, I was able to quickly decide on the ending for each of the branches. I made big decisions one right after the other, "If this is one ending, then this one is another ending. All right, this character must be this one!" The supporting characters became very important.

I wanted to do away with the cyber feel

----- Now, please tell us about the worldview.

Iwasaki We basically created a parallel world completely different from "Ace Combat 2." Nonetheless, there were some things that looked as if they had come from 2. The space base in the Comona Islands from the previous game, for example, became a very advanced space base in this one. But I didn't feel bound by that.

Satō Like the plane without a canopy (laughs). I was told about the canopy-less airplane by one of the staff members.

Iwasaki What? What do you mean?

Satō An airplane without a canopy.

Iwasaki Huh, there's a plane like that?

Satō When we were talking about the red fighter in "Ace Combat 2," he said, "By the way, that one didn't have a canopy." Then he said, "That's the connection (between 2 and 3), right?" but I had no idea (laughs).

Iwasaki In "Ace Combat 2," there's a rival called ZOE. Even after you defeat it, it keeps coming back. And it changes fighters. And if you're the best fighter, at the end of the game, there's a plane without a canopy called the ADF-01. It has a camera attached to each part of the aircraft, so that you can see your surroundings in a 360-degree all-screen view from inside the enclosed cockpit. (The new fighter planes) evolved from there... but I wasn't thinking that far ahead originally (laughs).



Iwasaki Takuya

Takuya Iwasaki is a member of the CS Development Department of Namco LTD.. He has been involved in the creation of many games, including the "Ace Combat" series, based on the belief that "something new, something better." He was the director of "ACE COMBAT 3 electrosphere."

Satō Dai

After graduating from high school and working as a part-timer, he was signed to Yasushi Akimoto's "Sold Out" at the age of 19. He left the company at the age of 21, after working on broadcast composition and lyrics. At the age of 24, he founded the indie techno label "Frogman Records" with a few friends, and in March 1997, he established the new label "FN (Frog Nation) - Tokyo." His interests range from TV, to music, games, techno and digital culture, but his basic motto is "Let's start something interesting with words."



Satō The designs for the Aero-Coffin system and cyberspace were initially done by Yoshimizu (from Namco's CS Development Department), right? Did not having canopies come from you?

Iwasaki I don't think we had "Ace Combat 2" in mind. We had a proposal to make a 360-degree screen, so we wanted to allow players to look around freely while flying in any direction from the beginning. But I thought it would be a bit difficult to pull it off, so I decided to make it an element that would expand the "joy of flying." We discussed the idea of a fully-covered cockpit with a 360-degree screen that could be viewed through a neural connection. That way the player would feel as if they themselves were looking around while flying.

---- Mr. Satō, how was your reaction when you were told that the computer would be connected to the nervous system?

Satō I guess it was a question of how to get rid of the cyber feel.

Iwasaki When I met Satō, I told him that I was thinking of cyberpunk as a genre, and that I wanted to make a story that could stand on its own as science fiction without any other elements, not just the graphics and visuals. Satō then suggested that if we were going to do it now, it would be better get rid of the cyberpunk feel.

Satō I think it's there as the foundation. I just didn't want people to say it looks cyber. That's why at first I was thinking more like, "Well, what would a society like that look like? Would it be more like a country or more like a corporation?". I also made some predictions about the future, like "distance" being lost and the legal system being compromised. Then I asked myself, "Will humans migrate to the electronic world?" "Would we be able to abandon our bodies?" I thought, "No, I don't think so. I'm from the generation that was fascinated by cyber during the 80's, so I thought I'd like to be in a position to speak out against it now. If not, I'll end up going there and never coming back (laughs). I thought "Anything is possible; you don't even need airplanes." I was really hesitant about that setup.

Iwasaki We decided to make it a world before the so-called "Cyberpunk" world. I'm glad we did that.

Satō There wouldn't be a war, otherwise, would there? (laughs) A hacker would just show up, delete it, and it would be all over.

Iwasaki I thought that if we only had imaginary battles in an imaginary world, we wouldn't be able to create a realistic feeling.

Satō At one point, there was even a suggestion that we should do everything that way.

Iwasaki Yes, there was.

Satō The game itself is not real, but if you put that kind of setting into a story, people who play the game won't know where to look for the hook. In that sense, I aimed for a very realistic worldview.

Iwasaki It took a while to get rid of the keyword "cyberpunk," but as a result of the discussions at the camp afterwards, even though the word was not there yet, we had a clear image of what we wanted the world to be like. That's how we came up with the term "Electrosphere."

----- To what extent is the electro-sphere replacing cyberpunk? Cyberpunk has an electric, end-of-the-century, decadent image. It also has a different sound, doesn't it?

Satō We first talked about Cyberpunk, but the pictures they showed me were pictures of an expo (laughs). Buildings from the 1970's or 1960's.

Iwasaki We also wanted to create a new approach to Cyberpunk, so we brought with us images of European architecture and modern architecture from the 1970s. We lined up the materials in a room at the inn and had a lot of discussions.

Satō When we saw the drawings, we agreed that the word we were going to use would not be "cyberpunk." If you don't get that feeling when you see a building, then you have to use the right word to describe it, or you will have an image before you start. I don't want people to start this game with the same image they had of Blade Runner. That's why I wanted to use words that wouldn't be imitated. If you don't feel that way when you see the building, you need to use the right words to describe it, otherwise you will get the image before you do it. I didn't want people to think of this game in the same way as "Blade Runner" and the like. That's why I wanted to use a word that wouldn't be associated with any of those works.

Iwasaki We were trying to think of words to describe various kinds of electronic spaces, so we asked the overseas staff too. One of the words that came up was "electrosphere." The sound of the word "electrosphere" had a sense of the 70's, which is what we were looking for, and it sounded a little new as well. The concept of "new but nostalgic" has always been in my mind, and I chose words like "new but familiar" and "I know this from somewhere." I think it's no good if it's too different, but on the other hand, I didn't want to be imitating something. I was asked to find a very delicate balance (laughs).

It's all about the fun of shooters

----- What do you think about the characters?

Satō We paid a lot of attention to the details of each character's lines. We didn't want lines to sound like something we had heard before.

Iwasaki Because we are of the same generation and have seen many of the same things. (laughs) ↗

Satō And I worry about it. Right away. I think it's fine when it's finished, but while I'm working on it, I think, "You can't beat that line, we who were born from it can't beat it." That's why I gave a lot of thought to something that wasn't like that. As I mentioned earlier, I didn't want to create a character based on an impression or image, but rather a detailed setting from the time he or she was born. That's why the first time I saw a character, he or she would say something that sounded like "something," and then I would create a personality.

----- Are there any hardship or behind-the-scenes stories on the screenwriting and worldbuilding process?

Satō I finished last fall, and then I waited for the sketches to come in. When the sketches were finished, we would meet again and then go our separate ways. It was interesting to see the creative process from a distance. Or easier, I should say (laughs). It was really interesting to see how our discussions were reflected in this manner. Like how they made Megafloat look like a sea firefly.

Iwasaki That's right. When we went to Umihotaru, we talked about making something big like it (laughs).

Satō You can see that kind of thing when you look at it later, can't you? I didn't think about the aircraft designs, but when they showed them to me, I was able to see how those discussions turned out.

Iwasaki In terms of development, one of the difficulties we had was the sheer size of the script (laughs). When we were working with Satō and his team, even if we said "let's finish this route today," it just kept getting bigger and bigger. In the end, we decided that if we were going to do it, we should include all of it so that this particular scenario could be fully conveyed. Then we had to do this volume here and that volume there, all of them, until... one disc wasn't enough anymore. We needed two (laughs).

Satō I told them at the beginning that I would write a lot. But they said they would do all of it, so I said, "Are you sure?" (laughs).

Iwasaki I thought it would be a bad idea to make the story seem like an afterthought because we didn't want to portray it. This was not an afterthought, but rather made so that the bones were there first, and then the meat was added on top. I wanted people to savor the whole thing.

----- There is also a mountain of information in between missions.

Satō What's more, it's slightly different depending on things like your actions in the mission and so on. Including those things took a lot of work.

Iwasaki You paid a lot of attention to that, didn't you? The slight differences between the news when go to one side and the news when you go to the other side, and the difference in how the news were broadcast. It's interesting to see the little nuances.

----- You get a lot of messages, too, don't you?

Satō I don't like to be talked to in an explanatory manner in games. I don't like being forced to talk to people, and I don't like being talked to without having my say-so (laughs). You can see the mail when you like and send it when you like. I think that was the fun of the 90's. That's what I said when I was recording the voices. The voice actors would strain their voices. Many of them were veterans, so they understood what I was saying without any explanation, but on the other hand, they understood so much that they became very emotional. That's why I said, "Please make it sound like you're leaving a voicemail."

Iwasaki You asked them to do it separately during combat and when not in combat. You asked them to do it as if it were really going to go to voicemail. They asked every time "Is this radio chatter? Is this voicemail?" (laughs).

Satō "No, you're in the middle of a battle. Please keep your voice up." I wanted the lines themselves to feel like they were coming in a e-mail. I made a lot of them thinking "I don't know if you're seeing this, but I'm leaving it here in case you are." Occasionally there are dialogues, but I made a lot of stories that allow the dialogue to take place without you having to do anything. This was really hard. It was the hardest part of the whole process It's hard to make people feel close to you just through e-mail.

Iwasaki We can't usually talk to people through e-mail, but without being able to talk about something in person, it makes us want to say what we're really thinking. At first you don't really feel that way, but after listening to them for a while, you suddenly feel closer to them, don't you? That's what I'm trying to do with the characters in this world.

Satō The characters are distant at first, but little by little, they start coming to you for advice. Of course, you have to be good enough for them to turn to you in the first place, so sometimes they don't ask for advice at all. There are also times when they compliment me, but they're not really complimenting me. Sometimes it's actually sarcasm. Sometimes they're angry, but they're actually angry in a loving way.

----- It is truly a well-crafted script. Finally, do you have a message for us through this story?

Satō For me, this story is about getting people to play with airplanes. I wanted people to appreciate the fun of flying airplanes. I think it is a way to show that this game is fun for people who don't like fighter planes or who are not good at shooters. We also made the setting so realistic and serious so as not to make people think that anime is bad or that it's become something of a joke, so I hope fans of previous installments will enjoy it as well. I was a fan of the first two games myself, so I thought about what would make me feel happy when I bought the third game, and what would make me feel disappointed.

So I hope people will feel that we've succeeded. Story itself is just a reason to enjoy the game, not the essence of its content. So, all I want is for people to enjoy playing the game. ↗

Iwasaki The most enjoyable time is when I am flying the plane. When I am flying, there is a moment when I can feel the human touch of the pilot who suddenly appears next to me. This time, I was very conscious of making sure that what I did during flight would be connected to what I did later on. There are many games that have story branching such as "Which do you want A or B?". Not so this time; the very act of flying itself is connected to what comes later. To put it bluntly, it may be the same in both cases, but I think this is what makes the game better. That is why we prepared a script that makes flying fun, and I hope you will agree with me. I also hope that people will play all five stories. It's not a game that you'll get bored with quickly, but one that you'll be able to play for a looong time because it's full of interesting elements. It took a looong time to develop (laughs).

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Face-to-Face with the Director and the Writer

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